



**Transcript of Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales
and Federal Trade Commission Chairman Deborah Platt Majoras
at Press Conference Announcing Identity Theft Task Force Interim Recommendations**

**Washington, D.C.
September 19, 2006**

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: Good afternoon; thank you all for coming.

I'm pleased to be here with FTC Chairman Deborah Platt Majoras to talk about federal efforts to combat identity theft.

The prevalence of this crime – studies indicate that about four percent of Americans are identity theft victims each year – combined with the lingering burdens and effects on victims, are the reasons why the President established the Identity Theft Task Force in May of this year.

The Task Force will present final recommendations to the President in November – this will be a comprehensive and fully coordinated federal strategy to combat identity theft. The recommendations will build on and ensure effective coordination of robust efforts already under way to prevent identity theft to assist victims of identity theft and to investigate and prosecute the identity thieves. We look forward to sharing those final recommendations with all of you in November, but we have some interim recommendations today that we believe is going to be implemented right away.

When we look at the problem of identity theft, we are reminded that the same technological advances that have improved our lives have also given new and broad opportunities to criminals including identity thieves. These criminals are clever and sophisticated, and they leave their victims with more than financial loss. As with any crime, victims suffer feelings of violation and stress, but in these cases victims have the added burden of essentially clean up the mess that the identity thieves leave behind.

So one of the interim recommendations adopted today by the task force squarely addresses that particular problem. We are recommending that the criminal restitution statutes be expanded to allow victims to recover the countless hours lost involving trying to make themselves whole again.

We are also recommending today the development of a universal police report for identity theft victims. This will ensure that victims have easy access to police reports documenting the misuse of their personal information thereby assisting them with the work they need to do to protect their credit rating and so on.

We are recommending that the public sector look seriously at ways to reduce access to social security numbers. Social security numbers are ubiquitous in government and as the valuable piece of consumer information to identity thieves, we must identify ways to keep them more confidential.

Furthermore, by reducing unnecessary use of social security numbers in the public sector, we can serve as an example for the private sector. The task force has also developed concrete guidance on how agencies should respond to data breaches. This step-by-step roadmap with agencies, which the task force recommends be immediately issued to all federal agencies and departments, is the first guidance of this kind, and it will allow agencies to more quickly, effectively, and it will allow agencies to more quickly, effectively, and intelligently respond to the types of data breaches that have become more and more common in recent years.

A quick and effective response by agencies to data breaches is good government, and also has the important effect of allowing the individuals affected by the breach to protect themselves before they become victims. I'm proud of the work of the task force to date, and I believe that based on today's meeting, that we are on track to produce a strong set of final recommendations to the President in November.

I'm now going to turn the podium over to Deborah Majoras, and then we'll be happy to take your questions. Deborah?

MS. MAJORAS: Thank you, Attorney General Gonzales. Good afternoon, everyone.

Identity theft truly is a direct assault on our citizens, and it attacks the very foundations of the information economy. And while we believe as a nation that we're making strides in this battle against this pernicious crime, it still remains a grave concern to our consumers. It's a huge violation and burden for them when it occurs, not to mention a significant drain on our economy.

The work of the task force builds on important actions that many agencies with particular expertise are already undertaking and will continue to undertake. But our goal here at the President's direction is to pool our resources and expertise and to coordinate an even more effective response, and then to extend that coordination to the state and local government level and also in the private sector, and naturally reaching out to consumers.

The interim recommendations are all directed at exercising federal leadership in this area. First and foremost, we have looked at the government handling of data and at the government response to data breaches, which we recognize is critical to our credibility and to our citizens' trust in their government.

We're looking, as you'll see in the interim recommendations, at that critical identifier, the Social Security number, to determine whether it's being used within government in ways that are unnecessary and could be potentially eliminated or replaced.

We want to show initiative with the private sector by looking at new forms of authentication tools, which the private sector already has well underway and are being used. And naturally, we are doing all that we can to assist victims.

So these and other recommendations we think not only will improve the federal government's response to identity theft, but the capabilities of our nation as a whole, consumers, business, and all levels of government, in ultimately eradicating this crime. Thank you very much.

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: Any questions? I know one of you had a question earlier. Yes, sir.

QUESTION: Yes, sir. In the light of so much ID theft being a direct result of pretexting, will you be urging Congress to take any action, pass any bills, that would prohibit pretexting for various things like telephone records?

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: That is something that did come up today in the meeting, and it's something that I think the committee is going to look at. As to whether or not we'll have any recommendations or requests to Congress, it's too early to tell. But it is something that the committee will look at.

Yes, sir.

QUESTION: In terms of data security in the public sector, it discusses the agency performance of both information privacy and security as uneven, according to these recommendations. Do you still find certain agencies are much more vulnerable to the problems we've seen over the last year than others?

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: Well, I think it is true that agencies have different procedures in place. And that's one of the reasons why one of the recommendations is that we provide guidance so that agencies can respond to a possible theft.

But also one of the things we'll be looking at is to whether or not are there certain things, perhaps, say, through the OMB process, and direct certain procedures be implemented at all the agencies so that there is a baseline level of protection to sensitive information.

MS. MAJORAS: And in addition, I would just add that many efforts are already underway at government agencies at the direction of OMB to improve data security practices. So this has already -- this has already begun. The unevenness that's cited there comes from report cards that were issued previously. But at least anecdotally, I can tell you that there have been -- vast improvements are being made at agencies, even in the last few months, because just like in the business community, we are responding to the breaches, to the methods that hackers and thieves use,

as we should respond, and we're trying to get ahead of that curve.

QUESTION: With regard to the private sector which you referenced earlier, is it possible in the final report that you guys will address the use of Social Security numbers in the private sector? Do you think it's possible that the numbers are over-used in the private sector also or could be used less?

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: One of the things that we talked about is what kind of guidance, perhaps even legislation, might be appropriate to deal with protection of identity information in the private sector. And I'm not here saying that that's something that the committee is going to ultimately recommend. It is something that we discussed today.

As we continue to move forward to the final strategic plan to present to the President in November, I think it's something that, you know, we'll continue to look at. But dealing with the private sector of course presents its own unique set of challenges. And that's just something we'll have to evaluate.

QUESTION: On the issue of military commissions, could you elaborate --

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: Military commissions, yeah.

QUESTION: Could you elaborate a little bit on the status of the negotiations and help us a little bit on this alternate language that the administration has offered up?

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: Well, we continue to try to work with Congress to try to find some compromise language. We think it's important. We think a compromise can be found which would allow the President to continue to gather information that would protect this country from another attack, but to do so in a way that would make it clear to everyone that of course we still believe very much in the Geneva Conventions and are advocates of the principles of the Geneva Conventions.

And I think that people have the misunderstanding, the misperception, that somehow what the President has proposed signifies a retreat. And nothing could be further from the truth. The Geneva Conventions are something that we have been a proud signatory for half a century. We believe that they're important. We continue to have some concerns about certain provisions of particularly Common Article 3, which is what the Court only held in terms of the application of the Geneva Convention to this conflict with al-Qaeda.

So we continue to have some concerns about that, and we're trying to work with Congress to see whether or not we can achieve both objectives of, again, allowing the Commander in Chief to gain information from the enemy to protect America, and to do it in a way that makes it quite clear that of course we are not retreating in any way from our obligations under the Geneva Convention.

Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Canada, as you know, released a long-awaited report yesterday on the treatment of Maher Arar. Since the Department was the agency that allowed his removal to Syria in which he was then tortured, doesn't the Department owe him an apology?

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: Well, we were not responsible for his removal to Syria, I'm not aware that he was tortured, and I haven't read the Commission report. Mr. Arar was deported under our immigration laws. He was initially detained because his name appeared on terrorist lists, and he was deported according to our laws.

Some people have characterized his removal as a rendition. That is not what happened here. It was a deportation. And even if it were a rendition, we understand as a government what our obligations are with respect to anyone who is rendered by this government to another country, and that is that we seek to satisfy ourselves that they will not be tortured. And we do that in every case. And if in fact he had been rendered to Syria, we would have sought those same kind of assurances, as we do in every case.

QUESTION: From the report, he had no connections with any terrorist groups, and he has sought an apology from the U.S. government.

ATTORNEY GENERAL GONZALES: Again, I haven't read the report.

Okay. Thank you all.

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